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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [IR](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: WARY OF U.S.-IRAN ENGAGEMENT, JORDAN OFFERS WORDS
OF CAUTION

REF: A. STATE 25892

[1](#)B. 08 AMMAN 3329

[1](#)C. AMMAN 668

[1](#)D. 08 AMMAN 3189

[1](#)E. 08 AMMAN 2660

[1](#)F. 08 AMMAN 3372

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (S) Summary: This cable responds to Ref A request for evaluations of third-country reactions to possible U.S. engagement with Iran. Jordan's leaders believe such engagement would reward regional hardliners while undermining Arab moderates - without convincing Iran to cease its support for terrorism, end its nuclear program or drop its hegemonic aspirations. Jordanian officials argue that the best way to counter Iran's ambitions is to weaken the salience of its radicalism on the Arab street by fulfilling the promise of a "two-state solution," resolving other Arab-Israeli disputes, and making sure that Iraq's political and security institutions are not overwhelmed by Iranian influence when the U.S. drawdown is complete. If U.S.-Iran engagement does proceed in earnest, Jordan hopes to be closely consulted in advance and for its interests to be taken into account. End Summary.

Beware the Iranian Tentacles ... and Cut Them Off

[1](#)2. (S) The metaphor most commonly deployed by Jordanian officials when discussing Iran is of an octopus whose tentacles reach out insidiously to manipulate, foment, and undermine the best laid plans of the West and regional moderates. Iran's tentacles include its allies Qatar and Syria, Hizballah in Lebanon, Hamas in the Palestinian territories, an Iraqi government sometimes seen as supplicant to Tehran, and Shia communities throughout the region. While Jordanian officials doubt dialogue with the U.S. will convince Iran to withdraw its "tentacles," they believe they can be severed if Iran is deprived of hot-button issues that make it a hero to many on the Arab street, such as its championing of the Palestinian cause.

[1](#)3. (C) According to the GOJ analysis, Iran's influence derives from the perception that Tehran is able to "deliver" while moderates are not. The main failure of moderates as cited by radicals is ongoing Palestinian suffering and dispossession despite an international consensus favoring a viable, independent Palestinian state living peacefully next to Israel. The MFA's Deputy Director of the Arab and Middle East Affairs Department, Muwaffaq Ajlouni, put it this way: "Iran is not welcomed in the Arab world, but it is taking advantage of helpless people." From Jordan's perspective, the U.S. would benefit from pressing Israel to proceed to final status negotiations, which would garner Arab support to deal with shared security concerns about Iran.

14. (S) In Lebanon, the GOJ fears Iran's Hizballah proxy has been given too much rope and could be poised to increase its political influence during upcoming parliamentary elections. The King sees the Lebanon-Israel War of 2006 as having benefited Iran and Hizballah, by allowing a Sunni Arab street enamored of "resistance" to see past its suspicions of the Shia. And then-Foreign Minister Salah Al-Bashir in late 2008 described the spring 2009 vote as "when we will know who won last May," referring to the outcome of the Doha Accords that put an end to Lebanese infighting. Much like with the Palestinian issue, Jordanian leaders have argued that the only way to pull the rug out from under Hizballah - and by extension their Iranian patrons - would be for Israel to hand over the disputed Sheba'a Farms to Lebanon. With Hizballah lacking the "resistance to occupation" rationale for continued confrontation with Israel, it would lose its *raison d'etre* and probably domestic support.

15. (S) In Iraq, signs of growing security and political stability over the past year in particular have served somewhat to calm Jordanian nerves about Iran's interference. The King and others have cited indications that Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki is showing himself to be a national rather than a parochial or Iranian-controlled leader. During the U.S.-Jordan Political Dialogue in November 2008, FM Bashir noted that the Iraqi government had a "tendency to appease Iran," but he saw increased Jordanian (and Sunni Arab) diplomatic engagement with Baghdad as a potential bulwark against Iran (Ref B). Positive trends notwithstanding, many of our Jordanian interlocutors stress that the U.S. should leave Iraq only when it "makes sense," and thereby avoid a political and security vacuum that could be easily filled by Iran (Ref C).

Prepare for Iran to Disappoint

16. (S) Jordan's leaders are careful not to be seen as dictating toward the U.S., but their comments betray a powerful undercurrent of doubt that the United States knows how to deal effectively with Iran. Foreign Minister Nasser Joudeh has suggested the Iranians would be happy to let talks with the U.S. continue for ten years without moving them forward, believing that they can benefit from perceived acceptance after years of isolation without paying a price.

17. (S) Upper House President Zeid Rifai has predicted that dialogue with Iran will lead nowhere, arguing that if the U.S., the EU, and the Arab states agree that under no circumstances should Iran be allowed to obtain a nuclear weapon, military force becomes the only option. "Bomb Iran, or live with an Iranian bomb. Sanctions, carrots, incentives won't matter," was how he put it to visiting NEA DAS David Hale in November. While Rifai judged a military strike would have "catastrophic impact on the region," he nonetheless thought preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons would pay enough dividends to make it worth the risks (Ref D).

18. (C) Speaking to PolOffs in early February 2009, Director of the Prime Minister's Political Office Khaled Al-Qadi noted that the Gaza crisis had allowed Iranian interference in inter-Arab relations to reach unprecedented levels. He urged the U.S. to "understand the history," explaining that "after the Israelis, the Iranians are the smartest. They know where they are going and what they are doing." He doubted there would be any diplomatic breakthrough before Iran's June elections, partly because Iranian pragmatists cannot be practical due to religious and ideological considerations. He hoped any dialogue would be aimed at weakening hardliners, many of whom believe their "Great Satan" rhetoric.

Talk If You Must, But Don't Sell Us Out

19. (S) If direct U.S.-Iran talks must happen, the Jordanian leadership insists it not be at the expense of Arab interests, particularly those of moderates like Jordan,

Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority.

Furthermore, they worry that engagement will set off a stampede of Arab states looking to get ahead of the curve and reach their own separate peace with Tehran. King Abdullah counseled Special Envoy George Mitchell in February that direct U.S. engagement with Iran at this time would just deepen intra-Arab schisms and that more "countries without a backbone" would defect to the Iranian camp. The Prime Ministry's Qadi has assessed that Iran sought to "transform the Israeli-Arab conflict into an Islamic-Israeli conflict" and that this strategy was already working with Syria and Qatar. Even more conspiratorially, then-FM Bashir in September 2008 highlighted Arab fears to a visiting CODEL that the United States and the West would allow Iran to play a hegemonic role in Iraq and throughout the region in exchange for giving up its nuclear program (Ref E).

¶10. (S) Asked late last year whether he advocated engaging Iran or working against its interests without engagement, the King told visiting U.S. Senators that U.S. should undertake both approaches concurrently but that engagement needs to be done "smartly" by setting benchmarks for behavior (Ref F). International Affairs Director at the Royal Court Jafar Hassan on April 1 operationalized Jordan's position as follows: the U.S. must not only consult its friends in the region, but declare that it is doing so publicly as a signal to Iran that the Arabs are full parties to the U.S. policy review. He called for the U.S. and the Arabs to work together to determine what deliverables are required from Iran, what subjects are appropriate for discussion, and also to set clear redlines. (Note: Hassan said Jordan was trying to work with its friends in the region to develop a joint-Arab strategy, but that this has yet to materialize. End Note.)

¶11. (S) Comment: Believing the U.S. is predisposed toward engagement with Iran, Jordanian officials have avoided forthrightly rejecting such overtures, but they remain anxious that Iran will be the only one to benefit - at their expense. Given Jordanian skepticism that Iran's regional ambitions can be reined in, they probably see establishing benchmarks as a way to keep U.S.-Iranian engagement limited and short-lived. Re-engagement could trigger a review of Jordan's relationship with Iran and with Islamic groups like Hamas, with which Jordan held limited security talks last year. When asked periodically whether by engaging with Hamas, Jordan was undermining PA President Mahmoud Abbas,

official interlocutors simply pointed out that Israel meets with Hamas through Egypt, that Syria and Iran are actively engaged with Hamas, and that Jordan cannot be disengaged. End Comment.

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